

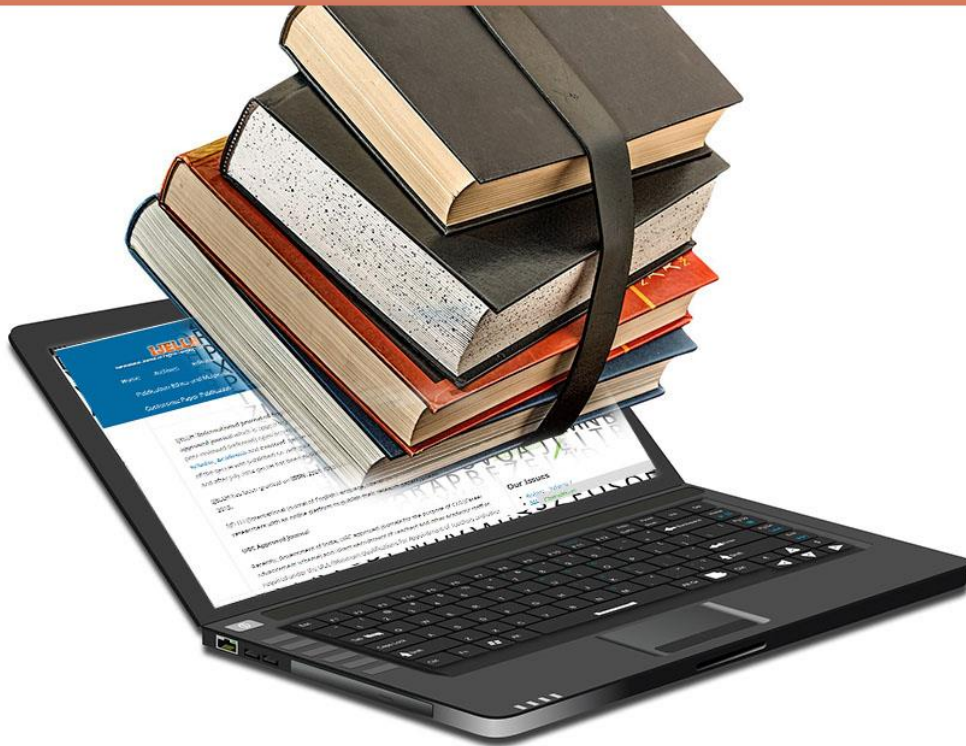
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Patriarchal Tones in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*

Abstract

A Raisin in the Sun and *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* are two plays that seem to be disparate but are actually related. While the former focusses on women bound by patriarchal tradition, striving to break free; the latter shows the struggles they face in a male dominated society. Subject to various forms of mistreatment and suppression, the women try to overcome their issues and support one another in the face of the trials.

Key words: male domination, patriarchy, tradition

The word Patriarchy comes from the Greek 'patriarkhēs' which means 'rule of the father'. In the literary and social context, it is generalised as 'rule of men' or 'a male dominated

society', where women are exploited, oppressed and dominated. Feminists have attempted to understand and highlight issues plaguing women and liberate them from patriarchal standards.

For centuries, women irrespective of race and colour have suffered mistreatment from their male counterparts. Black women faced double discrimination – firstly from their authoritative fathers and brothers, then handed over to their husbands, who considered them fit only for reproduction and domestic work; secondly from the white masters who exploited them, inflicting deep wounds into their physical being and mental psyche. The white woman's experience was none the less similar; her suffering started with being born into a male-dominated and class conscious society. Her exploitation came in the form of misogyny of the male populace, who from time immemorial had prejudices against women ingrained in them. Women in the earlier centuries, were not persuaded to obtain education, and were deigned to settle in the role pre-destined for them - that of a mother or a wife. Comparatively, few women got the opportunity to higher education and even then the choice of career available for them was limited.

Over the years the American literary scenario, teemed with innumerable works that spoke for the oppressed women. Some succeeded in creating waves which drenched the American society, especially intellectual women, with ideas of women's liberation.

Lorraine Hansberry was an activist, who fought not only for the liberation of African Americans and the social issues affecting her times, but also for the rights of women – foremost black women. She believed, that the only way women could free themselves from the age old prejudices, that was evident in her time, was through education.

In such a time as this, Hansberry, who “drew constant inspiration and strength from the courage and resourcefulness of the women she met daily, . . .” (Hansberry's Drama 5), created strong and vigorous dramas, concerning various topics ranging from the problems faced by the African Americans in the American society to the issue of slavery, materialism to male

chauvinism, women's rights, homosexuality, middle-class values, bohemianism and much more.

A Raisin in the Sun is one such brain child of Lorraine Hansberry. Originally titled *The Crystal Stair*, inspired from Langston Hughes' poem *Mother to son*, she altered it to *A Raisin in the Sun*, also taken from Langston Hughes' poem *Harlem*. This brilliant work burst into the American Broadway scene with such vigour that it garnered for its creator the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, surpassing famous dramatists of the time like Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill and Archibald MacLeish.

A Raisin in the Sun, is a play about deferred American dreams; it is about a middle class family's fight to survive against all odds and whether they succeed or not forms the crux of the play. At the outset of the play, we see the Younger family awaiting a cheque for ten thousand dollars, which is the insurance money they will receive on Big Walter's death. This money is the source of all their dreams and hopes. The members of the Younger family have different ideas on how the money should be used. The mother, Lena Younger and her daughter-in-law Ruth, want a comfortable home for the family, the son Walter Younger Jr. wants to invest in a liquor store with two of his friends with the idea of making quick money, the daughter Beneatha Younger, dreams of becoming a doctor, while simultaneously searching for her identity. The play progresses to show how each of these dreams get deferred, save the dream of a home.

Even though the play explores various themes, it is noteworthy to see how Hansberry has characterised the women in the play. Hansberry has shaped the strong characters of Lena, Ruth and Beneatha in such a way that they, indirectly, have become the dramatists' mouthpiece. These women represent the society they live in that is - the old, the in between and the new.

Lena, the sixty year old matriarch, who becomes the head of the Younger family by default, on the death of her husband, is very much old school. She is a God fearing Christian, with a proud bearing, one who must have suffered enslavement earlier in her life, as did the

women of her generation, adding to it were the troubles of raising a black family in America. Lena, has immense strength – as portrayed by Hansberry - that she acquired through years of struggle, from the death of a baby and finally the death of her husband. For a devout Christian like Lena, who holds on to the biblical principles, she believes that the man should be the head of the house. This is the reason she entrusts the rest of the money with Walter as she feels that her son is the one who should lead the family, “. . . to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be.” (A Raisin in the Sun 107), she says, the way it has been from generations. Lena is not the one to be changing it now. She is a woman who holds on to traditions, and believes that a woman’s place is not beyond her family and the kitchen. It is for this reason that she felt that it was not her place to question her husband who she says was, “. . . – hard-headed, mean, kind of wild with women – plenty wrong with him.” (A Raisin 45), but that was something she could live with, a silent affirmation of male domination.

Family is of utmost importance to Lena and, it is this stubbornness in her that keeps them together. When Beneatha refuses to acknowledge Walter as her brother in the light of what he was going to say to Karl Lindner, it is Lena who re-teaches her the lesson of love.

MAMA. There is *always* something left to love. And if you ain’t learned that, you ain’t learned nothing (145).

When it comes to her daughter however, Beneatha Younger, is all that Lena is not and more. Beneatha, the third generation of Youngers’, is an educated, independent, modern woman, and Anne Cheney says in *Lorraine Hansberry*, that Hansberry herself said in an interview with Mike Wallace “Beneatha is *me*, eight years ago” (60). She is born to fight or at least wanting to resist the patriarchy. Beneatha is ambitious, and has the freedom of choice, all of which her brother Walter disapproves and, because of which the siblings are constantly at loggerheads with each other. She is unconsciously supported by her mother and sister-in-law, be it for her medical schooling or for her to “flit so from one thing to another all the time” (47).

Beneatha is able to enjoy making decisions and ‘express herself’ because of the unvoiced backing from the women of the house; an unconscious resistance to the patriarchy.

If Lena “. . . found personal fulfilment and courage for political and social action in God” (Lorraine Hansberry 61), the daughter has no reservations in doubting the presence of religious entities and its institution. Beneatha also has a choice in the men she dates, preferring the complicated Joseph Asagai who “. . . offers Beneatha dreams of Africa, poetry, support, sensitivity” (63), to the rich George Murchison, who wants her to be a simple woman and not a poet or a doctor at that. George cannot accept a woman who has the capacity to think and who likes to talk and Beneatha rather not be with fools. Lena, supports her daughter and feels that she should not waste her time with such men, rejecting the age old idea of a well settled married woman, probably preferring her daughter to make something of her life, to realise her dream of becoming a doctor or anything she wants to be before getting on to the bandwagon called marriage. It is for this reason she tells Beneatha, “. . . You ain’t old enough to marry nobody- . . .” (A Raisin in the Sun 149). Lena’s character is Hansberry’s way of proclaiming to the world that women were evolving to think beyond the kitchen. As Maria W. Stewart says

O, ye mothers, what a responsibility rests on you! You have souls committed to your charge. . . . It is you that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love for virtue, . . . and the cultivation of a pure heart (Black Feminist Thought 2).

Ruth Younger, Lena’s daughter-in-law, has no qualms in being bound to her family and her husband, just like Ruth in the bible. She is the ‘in between’ woman, standing in the portico of tradition, peeking into the street of modernity. Her wishes and aspirations are nullified and she has become just like the worn out furniture in the room. As Hansberry says, “. . . life has been little that she expected, and disappointment has already begun to hang in her face” (A Raisin in the Sun 24). This weariness is reflected in her relationship with her husband, who

expects her to agree to everything he says, just for the reason that he is a man. Walter Younger, like the men before him sees his wife struggle every day, but does not take time to understand her. He sees her tiredness but does nothing to alleviate it. In fact he wonders why his wife cannot see his side of the argument and support him in investing for the liquor store. He only sees her “So tired- moaning and groaning all the time, . . .” (32). Walter, as a representative of the black man – or men in general - is ruthless in pinning the blame on their women for the incapability of black men to advance in society and realise their dreams.

WALTER. “We one group of men tied to a race of women with small minds!” (35)

It is not astonishing that these words come from Walter, as he, being a part of the patriarchy, automatically assumes what position a woman should hold in home and society. It is for this reason that Walter is unable to digest the fact that his sister, a woman at that, wants to be a doctor. Why not a nurse? Why not a domestic help like his mother and his wife? Why should a woman be educated if she is finally going to “get married and be quiet” (38). These are the unasked questions Hansberry poses through Walter’s character, that reveals to us the attitude of men in her time. Steven R. Carter said in *Hansberry’s Drama*

Like the slaves who had been forbidden to read or write, the patriarchal order of Hansberry’s society still restricted what women – black and white alike – could learn, although the restricting was done less openly through the supposed claims of tradition and custom; career counselling directed the relatively privileged (those permitted to have the semblance of choice) to become nurses rather than doctors, secretaries rather than managers, English teachers rather than scientists, philosophers, or mathematicians; . . .

(5)

Ruth, although hurt at the indictment, takes it with a pinch of salt. She is desperate to mend her marriage, wanting to stay in it rather than be out of it. The uncertainty the couple experience in their marriage at the beginning of the play slowly fades toward the end “when

they begin to talk, to go to the movies, to dance in the living room, to realize that they have a problem” (Lorraine Hansberry 70).

The play ends on a positive note, even though the dreams of the Youngers’ remain unrealised, the women of the house manage to tie the family together toward a hopeful future.

While *The Raisin in the Sun* offered a peek into the lives of the black lower middle class family and its women; Hansberry’s next play *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* swerved from the usual themes and dissected the current issues plaguing her time. She wanted people to “commit themselves to a goal” (Lorraine Hansberry 72) and to start caring about the world and everything in it.

Sidney Brustein is the central character and the play revolves around him and his wife Iris in the Greenwich setting of their home. The play also belongs to the Parodus sisters’, who are close to each other and are in each other’s lives whether they like it or not. It is both comforting and annoying at the same time. While *The Raisin in the Sun* had black women fighting the patriarchy, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* shows the Parodus sisters’ hoping to break free from the patriarchy. The father, late Mr. Parodus (of whom the play doesn’t offer much insight) has an indelible effect on his daughters’ lives. The sisters’ Iris, Mavis and Gloria Parodus as Anne Cheney says have, “. . . strikingly different, sometimes frightening views of their late father” (77). This effect seems to drive the sisters to wanting the men in their life to be what the father could not.

IRIS. “I wanted somebody who could, well, think; Mavis wanted somebody steady and ordinary. And Gloria, well, you know – rich men. Lots of them.” (*The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* 277)

Right from the start of the play we can observe the flippant nature of Sidney when it comes to his wife Iris. He does not deem it necessary to discuss his various business projects with her, be it the failed restaurant venture or the newspaper that was ‘unloaded’ on him. In

fact Sidney feels that if he discusses anything with his wife or listen to her opinions, he would “. . . never accomplish anything.” (The Sign 216). He constantly reminds and unconsciously hurts Iris for her inability to appear for an audition or of her psychoanalytic sessions with doctor Steiner. Iris, on the other hand does not consider too much of herself mainly because of her country upbringing. She believed that her father lacked sophistication and unlike the ancient Greeks who were philosophers and thinkers, she considered her father “crude and stupid” (277). Iris refuses to die in obscurity, hoping to make a name for herself, by which she can get rid of her insecurity and rural image. Her husband however, visualises Iris as an unspoiled mountain girl, untouched by the world. Sidney is so caught up in upholding this unreal image of his wife, that he does not see Iris as an individual having her own identity. Just like Walter Younger Jr, in *The Raisin in the Sun*, who does not try to comprehend Ruth’s issues, Sidney is not able to understand what Iris wants and what she hopes from him. He loves her but he is unable to discern that the fantasy he creates about his wife is “. . . chauvinistic; what he does is highly damaging to his wife and his relationship with her” (Hansberry’s Drama 94). Iris, tired of living as a part of Sidney’s fantasy, breaks free from him, lands a television commercial and, has her hair cut, the colour changed from red to golden yellow, refusing to be tied down.

IRIS. “I DON’T WANT TO PLAY APPALACHIAN ANY MORE!” (The Sign 315)

Iris leaves Sidney but not before showing him the mirror of truth about Wally O’Hara.

Mavis Parodus Bryson, the eldest, admired her father, who she says was a “. . . dreamer . . . sort of backwoods poet, . . . ” (306). She wanted to marry someone like her father, someone who was poetic and she found this quality in her husband Fred, who she says drove forty miles to and fro in an instable car, during their courtship just to see her. However, Mavis realised early on in their marriage that Fred had feet of clay. The sexual attraction gradually faded and Fred had become ‘steady and ordinary’. Mavis discovers Fred’s affair and even goes to see the mistress who is pregnant. She confronts Fred, after she goes once again to see the child, but

doesn't ask for a divorce as she feels, or, Fred has made her feel that she should be grateful for everything she has – a comfortable home well provided for, three boys for children and, a roof over her head. Mavis lacks in self-esteem, even though her father believed her to be the strong one. Unlike Medea, in Greek mythology, who desires to revenge her husband Jason for being unfaithful, Mavis does not seek revenge or divorce at that. She deals with the bitterness in her own way.

MAVIS. “. . . I take care of my boys. I shop and I worry about my sisters. It's a life”
(311).

Sidney has a new found respect for Mavis after this revelation. He realises how bigoted he was in his views about his sister-in-law and admires the strength she shows. If Mavis is ready to move on in her present life accepting and forgiving the infidelity of her husband, Iris decides to leave Sidney to discover herself. Mavis's concept of marriage is quite different to what Iris has. While Iris is ready to leave Sidney to find herself, Mavis is ready to lose herself to be in the marriage. The reason Mavis puts forth is that Fred is a dedicated father who loves his sons and that makes up for all the faults he has. This shows a striking similarity between Mavis and Lena when it comes to their promiscuous spouses.

Gloria Parodus, the youngest and the loveliest of the lot, is the game changer of the play. Her relationship with her late father is undefined. She calls her father “creepy” probably because of his fascination with Greek. He might have played Greek music to his daughters', which might have seemed creepy to Gloria and, he would have wanted them to live according to the Greek ideals. Gloria wanted rich men, something her father was not as he was from a rural background. She takes the shortest route to achieving her goal, that is, by becoming a prostitute at the age of nineteen. Gloria has failed her father and feels that when her father called her a tramp on his death bed he had branded her for life. It is like a curse, that has come to fulfilment. Gloria trying to commit suicide three times earlier shows how much she feels the

need to escape the guilt of not living as how her father wanted. Although she comes home putting an end to her old life of prostitution and drug abuse to start a new life with Alton Scales, she realises that her past will never let her live in peace. In her helplessness she commits suicide, but not before asking her father for his forgiveness and acceptance.

GLORIA. "Papa – I am better than this! Now will you forgive me-?" (*The Sign* 333)

The Parodus sisters' are an example of what the patriarchy expects from women. It expects them to be like Iris, to change herself into her husband's fantasy forgetting herself and her desires in the long run; like Mavis, forgiving her husband's infidelity and to go on in life with a smile, or like Gloria - a commodity to be used, abused and discarded. The three sisters however try to break free from the standards or at least influence those around them. Mainly, they succeed in breaking the mould of the "false concept of woman" (Hansberry's Drama 95).

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